Choosing on climate action

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Body

On the crucial issue of climate change, voters pondering their choice on Oct. 21 must consider a series of disconnects:

There's the disconnect between the concerns of Canadians, as measured by both polls and the mass turnout for climate marches, and most politicians, who would rather talk about other things (tax breaks, mostly).

There's the disconnect between what voters say they want (action to save the planet) and what they're willing to do about it (not so much).

And there's the disconnect between the politicians' rhetoric and what they're actually proposing. Even Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, who has made climate change one of his government's signature issues, admits that "we need to do more."

But the biggest single disconnect is the yawning gap between what the Conservatives say they would do (give Canada its "best chance" of meeting its targets under the Paris Agreement for reducing greenhouse gases) and what their plan would really lead to (the opposite).

Sure, you can pick apart the other parties' plans on climate change, and many are doing just that.

The Liberals correctly say they have done more than any other government on this front, and at considerable political risk. Bringing in a national carbon pricing scheme was the right thing to do and the most effective way to lower carbon emissions. The logic is irresistible: make something more expensive and you give people a powerful incentive to figure out ways to use less of it.

But it's also true that the Liberal plan still falls short, as the independent Parliamentary Budget Officer has found and Trudeau himself acknowledges. And, of course, even as they argued for fighting climate change, the Liberals rode to the rescue of the Trans Mountain pipeline. Indeed, they bought the thing to the dismay of environmentalists.

The New Democrats and Greens are certainly more ambitious on the climate front. The NDP would reduce GHGs nearly 50 per cent by 2030 and the Greens bid that up to 60 per cent. Both would end all fossil fuel subsidies and cancel all pipelines. Both would launch massive plans for green retrofits of homes and businesses.

But the NDP and Greens are conspicuously light on details of how they'd make all that happen. Their sweeping programs are mostly aspirational and neither bears the burden of seriously expecting to be called on to put their plans into effect after Oct. 21. There are distinct advantages to not being a realistic contender for power, and one is that you don't have to reckon much with the disconnect between what voters profess to believe and how much they're willing to sacrifice for it (see above).

The same can't be said for the Conservatives, the only party with a serious shot at power that would halt progress on climate change and even go backwards.

There's a certain irony in this because it was a Conservative government, headed by Stephen Harper, that signed Canada on to the Paris Agreement in 2015. That government was at least willing to pay lip service to having Canada do its share in meeting international targets on GHGs.

It would have made sense, from both a political and economic point of view, for the Conservatives to get on board with the principle of putting a price on carbon. After all, it's an idea that puts the market at the service of the environment and is supported by economists of all political persuasions, including many on the right.

But no. Carbon pricing (demonized as a "carbon tax") became anathema among Canadian conservatives, and so in order to at least give itself a fig leaf of respectability on climate change Andrew Scheer's party was obliged to come up with a plan of sorts.

Unveiled in June, it's a hodge-podge of tax breaks for homeowners, businesses and "innovators" under the theme of "Green Technology, not Taxes." The idea is that "big polluters" should pay, but regular folks should be let off the hook.

It's the kind of overly complicated plan that conservatives would dismiss as a pointless attempt to micro-manage the economy if it was put forward by a left-leaning political party. Even worse, it almost certainly won't get Canada anywhere near the Paris goals that Scheer still officially endorses.

In fact, two independent analyses have found that with Scheer's plan we'll miss those targets by a lot (109 megatonnes) or by even more (179 megatonnes). Under both scenarios, Canada's performance will be considerably worse than if it follows the Liberals' plan.

Between the parties with a real chance of forming government, then, the choice is between one that's making a genuine attempt at effective action (the Liberals) and one that frankly isn't (the Conservatives).

Voters who care about climate change shouldn't find that a difficult decision.

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